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ABSTRACT

Because of the unique program of Empire State College, the problem of providing compensatory courses about women and developing a strategy for eventually having them incorporated into the curriculum of a discipline has been avoided. The focus at this college has been taken from the teacher and placed on the student, giving the student the primary voice in what he is to study and how. Toward this end learning tools developed by the college are printed booklets called modules, written around a specific body of knowledge, area of inquiry, or problem. The first of these modules to reach the presses was entitled An Introduction to Women's Studies and was a consciousness-raising piece. And as typical of all modules it used history, sociology, literature, mythology, and some psychoanalytical theory to approach the problem. The second module was entitled Women in the 17th Century. This module was designed for students who wanted to investigate the history of women in America, but it is also used by students interested in colonial and/or social history. Other modules related to Women in the 17th Century are the Myth of Courty Love and Witchcraft in America. The author then continues to discuss the women's studies program at Empire State College and the college's innovative learning environment. (Author/PG)

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WOMEN'S STUDIES AT EMPIRE STATE COLLEGE

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Before we discuss Women's Studies at Empire State College, it would be well to describe the College and the students who attend that College. Both have a direct bearing on the approach that we are taking. Then you can bear in mind that because of the differences and commonalities we will all share, there will be ideas and thoughts that I hope will be valuable to you and other ideas that will not be appropriate to your situation at all.

Empire State College is the non-traditional College of the State University of New York. It was established as a separate institution, one of 72 institutions in the State University System, in 1971 with the purpose of offering an alternative approach to high education to the citizens of New York State. The College was expressly designed to serve those who could not or would not take advantage of the opportunities offered on the other 71 campuses of the state. The College is chartered by the Board of Regents of the State of New York to award the AA, AS, BA, AND BS degrees.

At Empire State College providing an alternative approach to higher education means easily accessible learning centers and units located throughout the state so that students do not have to be in residence to take advantage of the opportunity. It means that regularly scheduled classroom hours and semesters

have been abandoned and students may study where and when they are able. It also means that teaching and learning is not restricted to the college campus. As an institution we are committed to individualized learning and we believe the ways to learn are only limited by the human imagination. So the College utilizes every existing educational facility .... library, museum, college, laboratory ... and every community resource that makes sense to help a student acquire the knowledge and skills he seeks.

In order to institutionalize it, we utilize the contract system of education. Each student meets with a mentor in a one-to-one situation and defines his long range goals. Then together, with all the additional expertise they can bring to bear on those objectives, write a learning contract. The contract can be seen as a description of both the learning activities in which the student will be engaged, and the methods of evaluation to be employed to determine if the desired learning has taken place. I like to think of these learning contracts as the building blocks to achieving the long range goal.

What kind of students are taking advantage of this educational format? The average age of our student body at the present moment is 34. A large portion of them come to us with approximately 2 years of advanced standing

acquired either at other institutions of higher learning or determined through the careful evaluation of their life experience. For the most part they are highly motivated and have fairly specific goals in mind. 45% of them are women. They have been excluded from pursuing a college degree for all the reasons that are all too familiar to those of us here today ... time, place, family responsibilities, money, self-concept. For the woman entering our College, and let me remind you that they are not the whole student body, Empire State College came at the right moment in history, when the women's movement and even the much damned media have encouraged them to take a second look at what might be coming to them in life.

One of the challenges that Empire State College accepted early in its development was that along with providing the freedom to pursue learning in an unlimited combination of ways went the responsibility to provide the kind of professional guidance that assured the student and the institution that the student was doing substantive college level work. The college also recognized that one student and one mentor could not possibly be expected to dream up all the activities and resources that could be brought to bear in all the areas of interest that any one student might have. So one way, and

only one of the strategies designed by the College to come to grips with this problem, was to begin to produce our own learning resource materials that we call Learning Modules. I like to refer to these learning modules as mentors in absentia. They are printed booklets that are written around a specific body of knowledge, area of inquiry, or problem. They are almost always interdisciplinary. They are not independent study materials in the sense that they present correspondence study material to be learned and then tested. Rather they raise for and with the student the important questions that will lead him to discover the important concepts that underly the search for knowledge he has undertaken. The modules suggest a variety of resources a student may employ in order to master the concepts and skills he desires. These resources include bibliographies, media, experiences, products to produce , observations to make, skills of the scholar to be employed, community resources to be investigated, etc. The modules are being produced by a prominant faculty in residence at our Central Administrative Headquarters in Saratoga Springs. We refer to them as our Development Faculty. In addition, the writing of certain modules have been contracted out to the best scholars in the particular area of inquiry that

the College could find throughout the world.

Very early in the development of the College, and incidentally early in the development of women studies, the College contracted for some 20 modules that were loosely designated as women's studies. As I indicated to you most all modules are interdisciplinary.

Those of us at Empire State College generally take the position stated in the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education report Opportunities for Women in Higher Education and I quote:

> "The movement to introduce courses on women and interdisciplinary women's study programs should be encouraged by institutions of higher education, at least on a transitional basis, but these courses and programs should be organized within existing disciplines and not under separate departments of women's studies."

Therefore with the exception of only a couple of modules the assignments were made to produce materials in existing areas of inquiry paying particular attention to the contributions and problems of women within those areas. The first of these modules to reach the presses was entitled An Introduction to Women's Studies and was frankly a consciousness raising piece. And, as is typical of all modules,

used history, sociology, literature, mythology and some psychoanalytical theory to approach the problem. The problem was really one of creating a self-awareness in the student, be they male or female.

The second module to be printed was entitled Women in the 17th Century. This module was designed for students who wanted to investigate the history of women in America, but it is also used by students interested in colonial and/or social history. The module approaches the study by introducing the student to the tools of the history of women, including intellectual and social history, demography, biography, and a wide range of sources including wills, inventories, marriage settlements, songs, etc. The student is further encouraged to analyze several different approaches to history in order to appreciate the advantages and disadvantages of each approach. At two points in the module it is suggested that the student might like to investigate other modules that have a bearing on the material being considered. The first is the Myth of Courtly Love which is categorized as a module in literature. This module concentrates on the poetry of the Medieval Lyrics and considers the affect their writings had on the institution of the family and our own forms of behaviors involving men

and women. It also investigates our definitions of love. The second module that is suggested as a natural extention of the material being considered is Witchcraft in America. This time the module is considered an American History module but could also be used as an advanced exercise in psycho-sexual analysis of behavior, theology, creative literature, contemporary advertising, popular culture, and law. It could also be used as a laboratory example of mass hysteria, or simply studied as the phenomenon of witchcraft which is intrinsically interesting in its own terms.

Women's studies? We think so. A separate curriculum, department, area of study, we think not.

Unfortunately none of the other 18 other modules that were commissioned in those early days ever made it into print. Our Development Faculty, the people who devote full time to the commissioning, producing, editing, and critiquing these modules felt that the material that was presented was so colored by the biases of the women producing them that they lost their value as substantive contributions to the areas they were helping the student investigate. Unlike the module on women in the 17th Century they were less likely to instruct the student in the use of the tools and sources

of knowledge (or lack there of) in the area and help the student to draw his own conclusions, than they were to take a militant approach to the injustice done to women in those areas.

Perhaps in part what the Development Faculty was objecting to was what Florence Howe was referring tc in her article in the September issue of Ms. Entitled No Ivory Towers Need Apply, Women's Studies when she made the differentiation between compensatory courses and the absorption of this knowledge so as to significantly change history , art and literature courses. She points out in that article, that "it is easier to add courses in higher education than to change what exists. To anticipate general reform would be to expect faculty to re-educate themselves about women." This is where I believe Empire State College has a unique advantage over out sister institutions. At Empire State College the focus has been taken from the teacher and placed upon the student, giving the student the primary voice in what he is to study and how. By changing the role of the mentor from teacher to the educational resource person for the student, and because the faculty and the curriculum committee no longer control a student's educational opportunities. Instead they simply

contribute to them. The goal of the college isn't just the acquisition of certain skills and knowledge that somehow add up to a college education. The college has said it's goal is to help students acquire learning skills so that they can continue to be life-long learners. Therefore, I believe that we can acoid the problem of providing compensatory courses and figuring a way to eventually incorporate them into the acknowledged curriculum of a so-called legitimate discipline.

When a student enters Empire State College his interests, purposes, plans, or aspirations can probably be categorized under one of the four general areas that we label Vocational/Technical, Disciplinary/Interdisciplinary, Problem Oriented, Holistic/Thematic. Within those general frameworks we see the areas of studies breaking down into the arts, cultural studies, social theory, administration and professional studies, political economy, human development, science and technology, and education and social service. All of which are interdisciplinary in nature.

With that curricular design in mind, let me give you a brief illustration of how a student could design a program in women's studies at Empire State College. Let us imagine this is a young woman who is concerned with seeking an identity in

our modern society. This has long been recognized as a legitimate concern of the liberal arts college. (Note the 1970 ACE book of the year, Education and Identity.) Her general program category might be defined as problematic, a search for oneself. The area of study with which the student might begin that search could be cultural studies. These studies, for that individual student, might include historical and psychological studies of the self, the study of literature, the world of traditional academic disciplines, the problems of the community, the self with others, politics, social organizations, states writing, role of non-cognitive learning, myths (new and old), symbols and symbol systems. Then to define it more specifically in terms of that student's particular interests let us say that she is conscious of being a female person in our society and she wants to better understand exactly what that may mean. Her particular learning contracts could include the examination of our cultural institutions and their myths about women. Other contracts could include the study of the family, the nature of daughterhood, motherhood, marriage. Political myths imposed upon women might be examined, psychological and physiological factors affecting women as well as economic factors might be explored. Another area of investigation

might include the effects of western religion on women. The student might also like to consider the problems of youth, aging, and death as perceived by women. Then modules with the unlikely titles of Hitler's Biography, The Experience of Work, the American Slave: A Sociological and Historical Investigation, Freud: Theory of Personality could all be utilized, although none of those modules have been designated women's studies.

Just recently a group of women students in our Metropolitan New York Learning Center under the guidance of two of our mentors, Parimal Das and Ann Cooper, organized a five day living-learning experience around their common interest in themselves as women. The seminar combined readings, lectures, discussions, films, theatre, and personal interaction, to consider what it means to be a human being in a female form. They asked what characteristics of the female are biologically influenced and totally innate? What characteristics are learned through historically, culturally, economically, and psychologically determined factors? How have these ever changing factors influenced the behavior of women? How has technology altered the traditional nurturing role of women? Out of this five day residential experience has grown the desire to compare the role

of women in our culture with those of other cultures. Presently a 17-day trip is being planned to study womens role in social, economic, political, and educational fields in India. These women have made arrangements with their mentor to fly to India and engage in discussions and panels as well as visits and excursions that include such topics as Women and Adult education, women and social welfare organizations, women journalists, women in public life, women and family planning, women and art, women and religion, to mention only a few from their ambitious schedule.

We have only been in operation for two and a half years. In that brief period our student body has grown at the rate of 150 a month ot just short of a total enrollment of 2000 students at the present time. We already have approximately 150 graduates. We have learned a great deal in that short time. Just as women engaged in implimenting women's studies and courses directed at women or the inclusion of the consideration and contribution of women have learned. We presently intend to commission a second set of modules loosely designated as women's studies, hoping for much more satisfactory results than the first early attempt. In

the meantime, we at Empire State College consider the modules only one of the many resources we try to bring to bear to help a student fulfill his own and the College's educational objectives, so that he may be awarded that coveted degree.

What I was asked to describe was women's studies at Empire State College. What I have really been describing is the educational process at Empire State College and how it can be applied to women's studies, if any student should so desire.

As I mentioned at the start, cuch of what we are doing is unique to our institution because of the nature of that institution. However, more and more institutions of higher education throughout the country and the world have been adopting bits and pieces of our approach as they see them appropriate to their own situations.

At Empire State College we take the motto of the University of the State of New York very seriously. "Let each become all he is capable of becoming," and that includes women!